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ABSTRACT

An approach to developing reading and listening comprehension skills in junior high, high school, and college students through song analysis is described in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): One of the best methods for gaining attention for a cause or idea is through finding or writing a song which becomes associated with the desired message. The song can provide a vividness often not attainable in words and pictures. Further, songs can be used to help develop reading and listening comprehension skills and encourage insight regarding particular subjects. APPROACHES (excerpt): (1) Select a song which reflects a topic of interest; (2) Introduce the song by providing information about the author and background setting; (3) Play the song in a quiet setting; (4) After the song has been played, more than once if desirable, ask questions about the song which encourage reasoning. Based on verses one and two of "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground," sample questions which lend themselves to thought-provoking discussion are listed. (KC)

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Songs in the Academic Classroom

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Level:

Junior high, high school, and college

Author's Comment

One of the best methods for gaining attention for a cause or idea is through finding or writing a song which becomes associated with the desired message. For example, during the Civil War, the Union's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and the Confederacy's "Dixie" were very important in gaining and maintaining support for each side respectively. Political candidates and advertisers search for the song that will instill the desired message whether the hearer wants the message or not.

Songs are an integral part of our human heritage; the carriers of the history of our wants, fears, desires, and aspirations. Contemporary and traditional songs can bring an aesthetic and often stirring dimension to instructional procedures. The song can provide a vividness often not attainable in words and pictures. Further, songs can be used to help develop reading and listening comprehension skills per se and encourage insight regarding particular subjects.

Approaches:

1. Select a song which reflects a topic of interest. For example, an English or history class reading about the Civil War might use "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground" by Walter Kittridge (Glass, Paul and Singer, Louis C. *Singing Soldiers.* New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1968, pp. 36-37).
2. Introduce the song by providing information about the author and background setting. Provide copies of the song's words if needed.
3. Play the song in a quiet setting. It is sometimes helpful to dim the lights, light a candle, etc., to encourage a mood which focuses attention on the song itself.
4. After the song has been played, more than once if desirable, ask questions about the song which encourage reasoning. The following types of questions are suggested:
   a. *Inference* questions require students to reason deductively and reach conclusions relative to events not specifically described.
   b. *Value judgment* questions require students to evaluate the appropriateness of human behavior.
   c. *Extrapolation* questions require students to go beyond the immediate message to determine what logically might have happened.
   d. *Interpretation* questions involve putting figurative language into more standard language.
5. Verses one and two of "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground" are presented below followed by sample questions.

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Tenting on the Old Camp Ground
By Walter Kittridge

1. We're tenting tonight in the old camp ground
   Give us a song to cheer
   Our weary hearts, a song of home
   And friends we love so dear.

   Many are the hearts that are weary tonight
   Wishing for the war to cease,
   Many are the hearts looking for the right
   To see the dawn of peace
   Tenting tonight, tenting tonigh', tenting on
   the old camp ground
2. We've been tenting tonight on the old Camp ground
   Thinking of days gone by
   Of the lov'd ones at home that gave us the hand
   and the tear that said "Good bye!"

Discussion Questions

1. Were the singers of this song likely to have been victorious in a recent battle? (inference)
2. The writer of this song, Walter Kittridge wrote "Tenting Tonight. . ." at his New Hampshire home. He introduced it to Union soldiers, with whom it became very popular, by singing it as he traveled around to visit Union camps. Historical accounts indicate that the song also became very well liked by Confederate soldiers who sang the song in their camps. Why did "Tenting Tonight . . ." become popular with Confederate soldiers? (extrapolation - also tapping students' general knowledge of the war. ex: prison camp life).
3. Do the soldiers think that the war will soon end? (inference)
4. Do the soldiers want the war to end more than they want victory? (inference)
5. What is another way of saying "the dawn of peace?" (interpretation)
6. Would the soldiers have a right to complain about their conditions if they had volunteered for duty? (value judgment)
7. Would the soldiers have a right to complain if they had been drafted? (value judgment)
8. What is another way of saying "the lov'd ones at home who gave us the hand." (interpretation)
9. What does the line "thinking of days gone by" suggest to you that the soldiers thought about? (exprapolation)

The sample questions above do not have specific answers but lend themselves to thought-provoking discussion. Further, probing questions frequently raise other questions and topics for elaboration. The suggested types of questions provide a valuable framework for generating stimulating questions. The purpose is not to fit questions to types or vice versa but to search material for fitting questions. Undoubtedly, some questions could logically be classified in more than one category but this is of no consequence considering the purpose of composing the questions.

Introducing students to songs within the larger academic program adds much to that program. Resources are virtually limitless and the rewards delightful.